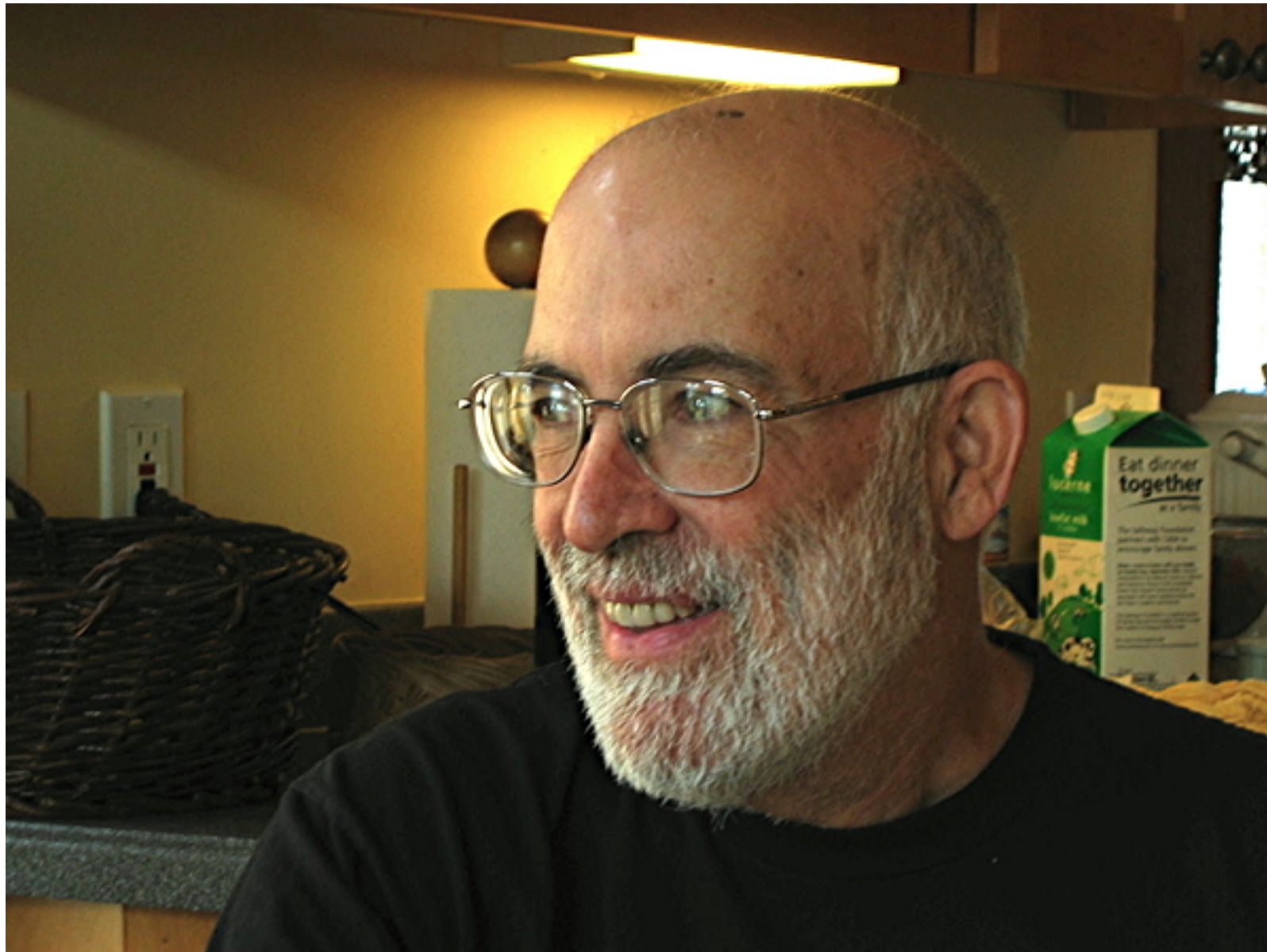


Remembering John Hess

by Chuck Kleinhans



My *JUMP CUT* co-editor, John Hess, died on August 14, 2015 from complications following his living with Parkinson's Disease. Friends and family had opportunities to see him in his last months. He died at home with caregivers present, as he wished. John's wife, Gail Sullivan, died of cancer a few years earlier after a career as a labor organizer with the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the California Nurses Union. John was survived by his two sons, Andy Hess and Sean Sullivan and their families.

John will be remembered by many people as an important labor organizer, particularly for part time and contingent teachers in the college and university system. While at San Francisco State University, he participated in the successful effort to unionize the faculty in the California State University system. Thereafter he worked to organize the contingent faculty (full and part time temporary) and served in several elected and appointed leadership positions in the California Faculty Association (CFA). After returning to California from the East Coast in the late 90s, he worked as a staff member for the CFA for seven years, especially responsible for organizing the contingent faculty. He was honored for his pioneering and exemplary work in spring 1915 at a national meeting in Los Angeles. He was able to attend and receive the personal well wishes of the national crowd attending. A recognition of John's work in teacher organizing can

be found here: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/LastWordHess/index.html>

John will also be remembered as a teacher. He taught as a TA in Comparative Literature at Indiana University, where we first met as grad students. He also taught as a lecturer at Sonoma State, at San Francisco State (for 14 years), and at American University and the University of Maryland. He also taught as an Associate Professor at Ithaca College. Some of John's happiest memories were of his former students who had gone on becoming involved in film, political activism, and community engagement. I was with him many times when a former student would come up and say how he had touched their life. This made him immensely proud and pleased. John saw his work as a teacher as encompassing much more than the traditional academic classroom. He was active in the 1970s in the East Bay Socialist School where he taught introductory courses on Marxism. With the Berkeley JUMP CUT collective of the 70s and 80s he shared the practical knowledge of putting out a radical publication and developing a politically informed film aesthetics. While there were scheduled weekly meetings, in fact the house was a 24/7 locus of political filmmakers, critics and students, and assorted people passing through town who carried on a running dialogue about politics, media issues, and life in general. His work with lecturers in the Cal State system was aimed at teaching them the most effective strategies and tactics to gain empowerment. Here his work was truly ground-breaking. John moved the lecturers from being a kind of accidental after-thought in Cal State system unionizing to its rightful place as representing the majority of the classroom teachers and being closely linked to the concerns of students and communities.

John's contribution as an editor to JUMP CUT's progress and development was fundamental. We first talked of the need for a new political film publication our last year in grad school in Bloomington Indiana. Our partners got teaching jobs and we were trailing them and thought we had time on our hands. So it seemed sensible to start a film publication even though we were over 2000 miles apart and had to communicate mostly by mail (no email, and long distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive at that time). Crazy idea, but we did it with the help and encouragement of others.

John came to his left politics not from theory or sudden passion but from life experience. On graduation from college he joined the Army and went through military language school, learning Russian. His Cold War post was in rural Germany listening to Soviet tank drivers maneuvering in East Germany. (Ironically, they were like him, away from home in a foreign country.) He also learned German from locals in bars, something that horrified his German teachers when he went back to graduate school for formal instruction. He returned to the US with the student and anti-war movement underway, but his approach was as a veteran. When he arrived in the Bay Area in the early 1970s, he circulated in the fluid movement of New Left activism, radical political filmmaking, and a new critical intellectual climate. Engaging with new political movements and forms such as feminism, gay/lesbian perspectives, as well as the established post Civil Rights black and Chicano movements, and viewing new films from around the world produced the need for a better understanding.

Reading in socialism and Marxism provided a crucial perspective. But John was also fascinated with the actual lived experience of socialism. He travelled in East Germany on research during graduate school and returned around the fall of the Berlin Wall with an interest in the lives of the people he met above all else. Similarly with his visits to Cuba and Nicaragua and El Salvador: the people, not the politicians, celebrities or manifestoes were what mattered.

John and I shared that leftist learning experience along with others on the *JUMP CUT* staff. I think our mutual stubbornness kept us bonded together, but also our shared values and complementary interests. As an editor John was always clear,

direct, and pragmatic, measuring submitted articles against his own undergraduate students horizons. What would they get out of an article, could they understand the argument? Equally important John had a comfortable and determined view of the economic realities of self-publishing. For decades he kept us afloat and moving along running the business end of *JUMP CUT* along with the pragmatics of pasting up and laying out an issue, and mailing it off to subscribers and bookstores.

Perhaps this reflected his upbringing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His father was a businessman and his mother returned to her Mennonite roots later in life. The combination of practicality and a plain and simple life marked his daily behavior and his spirituality that often took the form of meditation, fasting, and retreat. But that was balanced with a love of activity: sports when he was younger, running and walking when older and for a long stretch canoeing as part of a club. He sometimes arrived from a week on the rivers needing massage and a hot tub and laughing about how he was getting too old for this.

John's personal life involved several marriages (and divorce) to remarkable women. Through it all he was a proud father of his two sons, Andy Hess and Sean Sullivan. Andy grew up mostly in Germany to which his mother returned, but spent summers with John and went to college at San Jose State. A very talented electric bass musician, Andy has played with blues, rock and jazz musicians around the world. John loved attending Andy's shows and supported his artist son's goals and choices. John met Sean well into Sean's boyhood and stood by him during some stormy and trying times (for all concerned) as Sean found his way, emerging as a successful businessman involved in local area moving and a rare items record store. When Sean's mother, Gail Sullivan, was diagnosed with cancer, John worked alongside her in the decade-long medical process, and Gail in turn shared her own understanding when John was diagnosed with his own progressive debilitating disease.

As a writer and critic John's strongest editorial commitments were to the politics of Hollywood film, typified in his classic article on *Godfather 2* which ran in an early issue of *JUMP CUT*. And equally important was the actual practice of political filmmakers. He quickly developed a great interest in Latin American film and filmmakers, travelling to Cuba, to Nicaragua and El Salvador and to Mexico, and meeting filmmakers who passed through the Bay Area. John was especially sensitive to the artist's difficulty of seeing a film project through to the end and dealing with the recurrent issues of organization, finance, the group effort, distribution and exhibition as well as the politics and aesthetics of a particular media work.

Parkinson's is a progressive and irreversible disease, different for every individual. John was diagnosed about 7 years ago and was conscious of planning as much of his life as possible from that point on. When the disease kept him from being able to write and progress on some of his projects he was bitterly sad at not being able to complete a project he knew was important. He continued to be an active part of the *JUMP CUT* editorial team as a critical reader until his last year, and I had the opportunity to review his archived JUMP CUT materials which we expect to go to an appropriate site. An extensive set of interviews he conducted with East German filmmakers in the later 1970s and early 1980s has already been deposited in an archive at the University of Massachusetts. A series he did with US independent documentary political filmmakers, essentially people who had been involved nationally with the aftermath of the New Left Newsreel group will also be archived shortly. A collection of important materials on Latin American cinema is now at Hong Kong University.

John was my closest male friend through my adult life. We bonded over shared values, shared politics, and a shared commitment to trying to change the world for the better. As a teacher and critic John wanted to help people understand the

world so they could be smart in changing it. As an editor he wanted to help writers connect with diverse readers. As a political activist he wanted to empower people at the grassroots level. By necessity we had to meet in person, and that began in the summer of 1974 with me heading out to Berkeley to hash out the pragmatics and idealist goals we had for *JUMP CUT*. That annual extended time together, supplemented by his trips to Chicago and connecting at conferences and festivals, welded us into a tight bond. But rather than critiquing manuscripts and solving layout hassles, or listening to way too much of KPFA talk radio (one of John's addictions), what I remember most is John's incredible generosity. When I had to pack up and leave my Chicago household, he came in the middle of a bitter winter to help, knowing my packrat ways would have to be tamed, and with plenty of boxes and tape. When I took my last drive from Chicago to Oregon in 2009, he joined me travelling across the upper Great Plains with a soundtrack of Rightwing Radio (we provided a running sarcastic response) but mostly jazz and rhythm and blues (the one audio experience we always agreed on). In fall 2014 we did another trip, drastically short due to John's physical limits, to Salinas to visit the new Steinbeck museum, and over to Monterey where John attended language school for a year back in the 60s. These close personal times are a treasure to me. John was the finest man I've ever met.



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